Kennedy Loyalists Not Sold on Auction

Ownership of JFK Items Questioned

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Kennedy family loyalists this week questioned a New York auction house's right to stage a much-ballyhooed sale of dozens of artifacts collected by the late Evelyn Lincoln, John F. Kennedy's longtime personal secretary.

Boston lawyer Paul Kirk, chairman of the family-controlled Kennedy Library Foundation, suggested Lincoln might not have been the rightful owner of many of the items she amassed during her 12 years as Kennedy's secretary in Congress and the White House.

"You can be sure that serious questions will be raised in appropriate venues by appropriate parties and authorities regarding the provenance of these items," Kirk said Tuesday in a statement left on a reporter's voice mail.

Kirk, a longtime Kennedy political operative, did not specify whether these questions would be raised in a

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lawsuit or some other form. Kirk said he learned about the auction only last week from newspaper accounts; he did not return telephone calls seeking elaboration.

Arlan Ettinger, president of Guernsey's auction house, which is staging the sale, stoutly defended the items being offered as "absolutely appropriate and correct." The most noteworthy articles are then-Rep. Kennedy's two handwritten diaries describing his 1951 fact-finding trip to Eastern Europe. Ettinger said he didn't know how many of the auction items—some 600 in all, expected to bring at least $3 million—originated with Lincoln.

But former Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen, who served in the White House with Lincoln, said yesterday: "It's outrageous. . . . She had no legal entitlement. . . . I don't think *I'll* be bidding on it."

Lincoln, who died in May 1995 at 85, bequeathed much of her memorabilia to Baltimore collector Robert L. White, who is providing more than 300 items to the auction scheduled for March 18-19 at Manhattan's baronial 7th Regiment Armory. Many, though not all, of White's items came from Lincoln, whom he befriended in the last two decades of her life.

The auction house announced last week that it will put White's items on the block along with 300-odd other pieces from 10 different collectors. These will include Flash II (JFK's 22-foot-long racing sloop), two cane rocking chairs used by the president, an antique desk from the Oval Office, various ceremonial pens and presidential doodles.

The 50-year-old White, who in September quit his job selling industrial cleansers to pursue his passion for Kennedy memorabilia full time, is perhaps the nation's most celebrated collector of JFK relics. He estimated that he owns about 100,000 artifacts and documents. He said he hopes the auction will bring him as much as $1 million in seed money to launch a museum to house the collection. His nuggets include Lincoln's personalized silver Tiffany calendar, a gift from Kennedy to commemorate the Cuban missile crisis; Kennedy's Hermes black leather briefcase that he used for 15 years; and the sunglasses he wore the November 1963 day he was assassinated in Dallas.

White scoffed at Kirk's statement. "That guy, I guess, is covering his butt," he said. "It seems that the real problem is it's not the Kennedys selling it, it's someone else." White pointed out that Kennedy loyalists didn't complain when the president's children, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg and John F. Kennedy Jr., sold many relics after Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's death in 1994. The auction at Sotheby's fetched $35 million.

"I guess their attitude about me is, this guy has a great collection—we gotta watch this guy," White said. "They're assuming that there's something outrageous here. But there's nothing in this sale that's volatile. But they've got to be gunshy after all this Seymour Hersh stuff about the 'Dark Side of Camelot.'"

Neither Kennedy nor Schlossberg could be reached for comment.

Last year, White offered to sell the Eastern Europe diaries to the Kennedy Library for a six-figure sum. After failing first to persuade White to donate the diaries and then to find someone willing to buy them on the library's behalf, library officials bowed out.

The private library foundation—which lends financial and administrative support to the government-run presidential library—has a half-dozen Kennedy family members on its board. Schlossberg serves as its president and John Kennedy Jr. is vice chairman.